

WEST VIRGINIA HISTORY

A Quarterly Magazine

CECILE R. GOODALL, *Editor* DR. JAMES L. HUPP, *Managing Editor*

Vol. XXVIII

July, 1967

Number 4

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West Virginia History, a quarterly magazine, published in January, April, July, and October by the State Department of Archives and History, Charleston, West Virginia. Copyright 1967 by the Department of Archives and History of West Virginia. Application for second class mail pending.

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Offices: State Capitol, Charleston, West Virginia.

Top of Allegheny

By Stan Cohen

An outstanding example of a Civil War campground and battlefield is well preserved at Top of Allegheny (also called Allegheny Summit, Camp Allegheny and Camp Baldwin), just off Route 250 in Pocahontas County, West Virginia (see map). This could very well be the best example of an unaltered Civil War battlefield in the United States.

Over 4,200 feet of trenches, four gun emplacements and one command post are still plainly visible. Several other remnants of trenches and graves are found at Cheat Mountain, Elkwater and Bartow in the vicinity of Top of Allegheny.

Cabin sites of the Confederate troops are still marked by rock piles left from their chimneys and contained in all about 1,200 men. Many bullets, metal pieces and personal implements have been found among these piles.

The battlefield site straddles the old Parkersburg and Staunton Turnpike and was the encampment of several Confederate units during the winter of 1861-62. One battle was fought here on December 13, 1861, resulting in a Federal defeat. The turnpike during this time was an important military road across the Allegheny Mountains from the Shenandoah Valley to the counties of western Virginia and gave direct access to the vital Baltimore and Ohio Railroad further north. At 4,250 feet in elevation, this was the highest Confederate winter campground during the war.

On October 3, 1861, Federal forces under General Joseph J. Reynolds attacked the Confederates at Camp Bartow, some eight miles distant from Camp Allegheny. The Federals were repulsed and forced to retire to positions on Cheat Summit, some twelve miles away. The Confederates retired to Top of Allegheny, where they made preparations for winter camp.

Several other troops reinforced the Confederates until they had a total strength of approximately 1,200 men under the command of Colonel Edward Johnson, of the 12th Georgia infantry. Additional troops stationed there were the 21st, 35th and 52nd Virginia, Hansbrough's and Reyer's battalions, Lee's and Miller's batteries (eight pieces) and a detachment of the Pittsylvania Cavalry.¹

The troops began to fortify the hill top and build winter cabins for themselves.

On December 12, 1861, General Milroy commanding 1,750 men² of the 9th and 13th Indiana, 25th and 32nd Ohio Volunteers,

¹ *The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies and Navies in The War of The Rebellion.* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1881), Series 1, Vol. V, 463.

² *The Soldier in Our Civil War*, Stanley Bradley Publishing Company (New York, 1885), 437.

TOP OF ALLEGHENY

POCAHONTAS COUNTY, W. VA.

WINTER ENCAMPMENT CONFEDERATE TROOPS
1861-62

SCENE of BATTLE DECEMBER 13, 1861

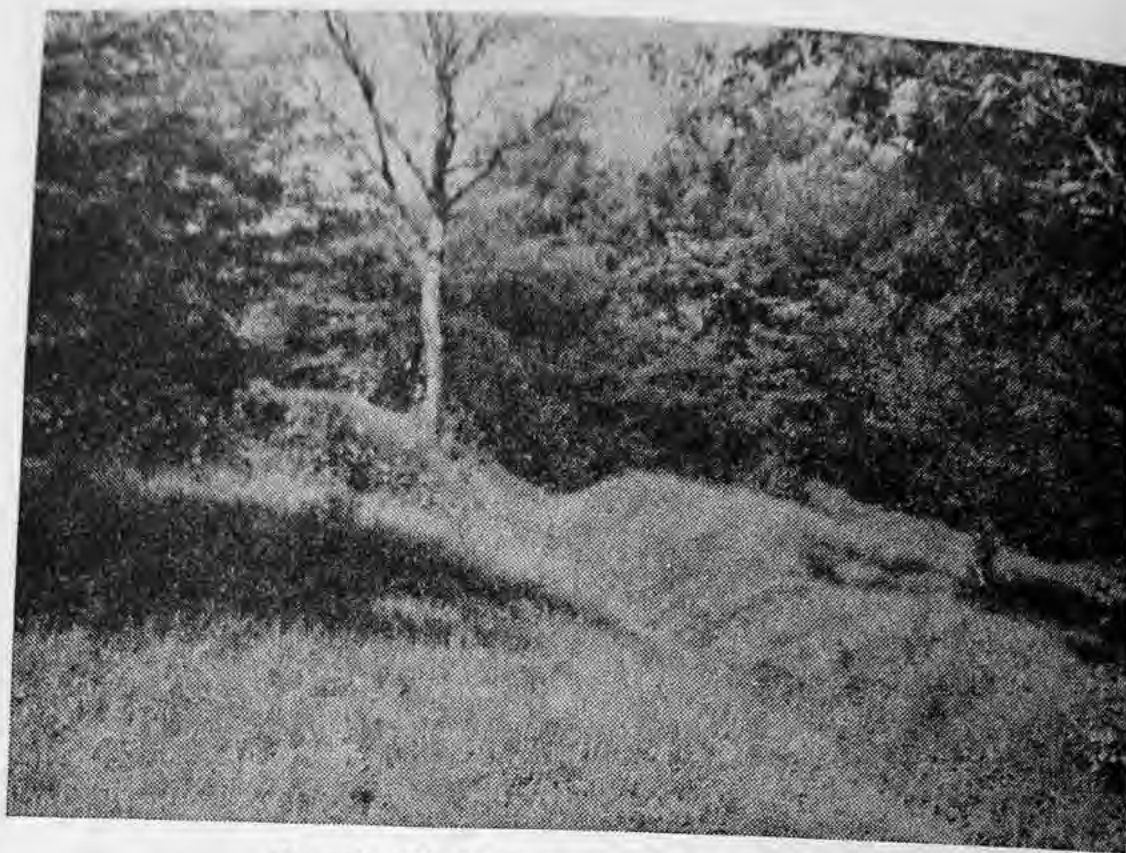


AREA MAP

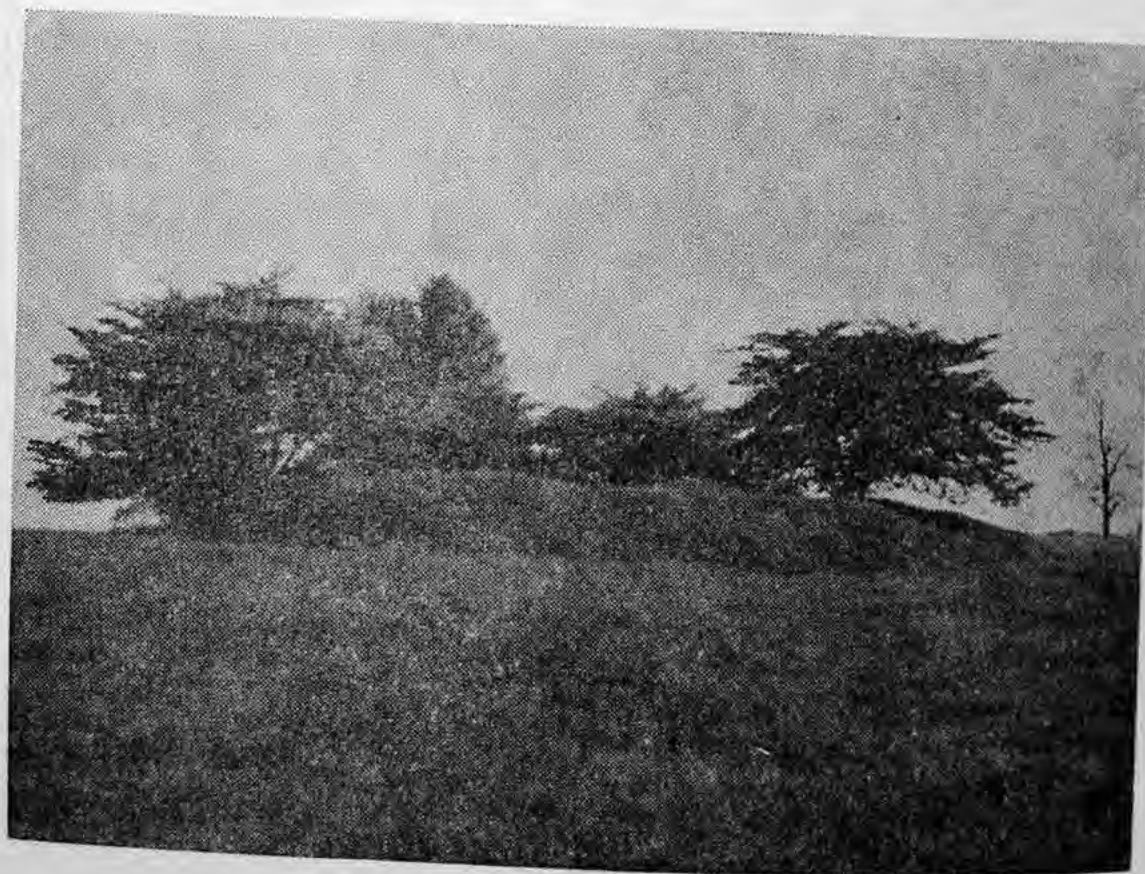


LEGEND
 - - - - - VISIBLE TRENCHES
 - - - - - GUN EMPLACEMENTS
 SCALE 1" = 80'

SURVEYED BY STAN COHEN, WILLIAM McNEEL, JAMES BERRY MAY 16, 1964



Trench still visible on north side of field.



Command Post inside fortifications.

2nd West Virginia Volunteers, Bracken's Cavalry and Rigby's Artillery proceeded up the turnpike from Bartow to attack Camp Allegheny. These troops had been gathered from Belington, Beverly, Huttonsville, Elkwater and Cheat Mountain and were believed to number 5,000 men by the enemy at the time of the battle.³

Milroy split his command and ordered Colonel Moody to take part of the troops around the left of the enemy and attack. Milroy at the same time was to attack on the right.

Several deserters from the Confederate forces were leading Milroy's troops, but they encountered Confederate pickets who alerted the troops defending the hill and thwarted a surprise attack. Johnson at once called his troops together and from the commanding heights poured down a murderous fire upon the enemy. The battle swayed back and forth from early morning to mid-afternoon when the Federals were forced to break off the engagement.

Moody's forces in the meantime had difficulty in getting to the scene of battle and by the time they arrived Milroy's command was falling back. He attacked anyway, but by now Johnson could bring his whole command to bear on the enemy and Moody's troops were driven from the field.

The Federals proceeded back down the turnpike to safety in Randolph County, carrying many of their wounded with them.

Total casualties for the Union forces were 20 killed, 107 wounded, and 10 missing; and 20 killed, 96 wounded, and 28 missing on the Confederate side.⁴ Considering the length of battle (about seven hours) and the number of men involved, the casualties were quite low.

The Confederates held the area through the winter, and left on April 2, 1862, for the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia. Most of the winter was spent in reinforcing the hill, building cabins and trying to stay warm.

Many soldiers wrote of the hardships encountered there due to the rain, snow, bitter cold and monotony of duty broken only occasionally by scouting parties, an alarm or a furlough.

Due to the inclement weather conditions this area was abandoned as a winter campground. During the remaining years of the war several soldiers, who passed by the place wrote of the rain, snow and cold even in April and May.

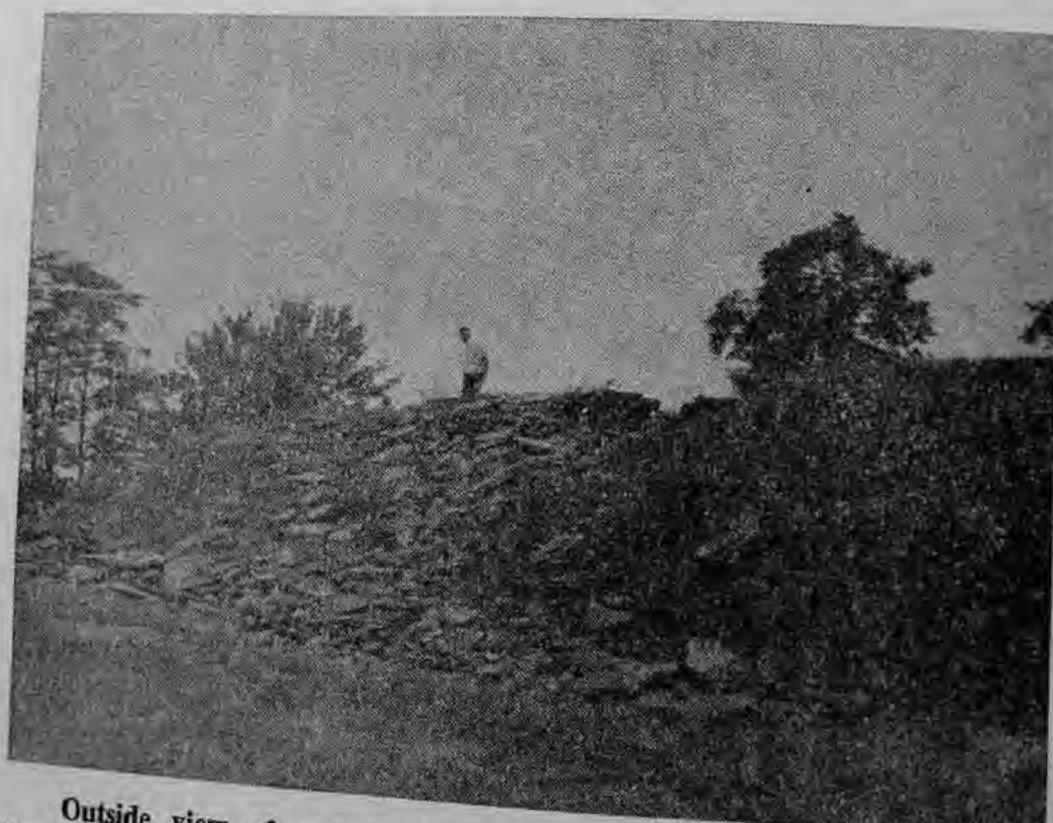
As a result of this battle, Colonel Johnson was promoted to Brigadier General as noted in a message sent to him by J. P. Benjamin, Confederate Secretary of War.

³ *Official Records*, Series I, Vol. 5, 464.

⁴ *Soldiers in Our Civil War*, 437.



View of Parkersburg and Staunton Turnpike from hilltop showing trench system. Cabin sites in left background.



Outside view of gun emplacement on west end of hill. Rocks are remains of gun port. Mound about 5' to 6' high.

War Department, C.S.A.
Richmond, December 23, 1861

The report of the engagement of the 13th instant, in which your gallant command met and repulsed a vastly superior force with a steady valor worthy of the highest admiration, has been communicated by me to the President, and I rejoice to be made the medium of communicating to you and to your officers and men the expression of his thanks and of the great gratification he has experienced at your success.

I am happy to add that the President readily and cheerfully assented to my suggestion that you should be promoted to the rank of brigadier-general, as a mark of his approval of your conduct, and your nomination will accordingly be this day sent in to the Congress, and take date from the day of the battle.⁵

J. P. Benjamin

This property should be preserved either by a private concern or the State as a battlefield site and some limited recreational facilities and interpretative diagrams installed. There are many attractions in the area already that draw many people, such as the Cass Railroad, Green Bank Observatory, Spruce Knob, etc. and this could be a popular attraction, if properly promoted.

⁵ *Official Records*, Series I, Vol. V, 464.